Ancient Ideals

In

Modern Masonry

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ANCIENT IDEALS IN MODERN MASONRY

An Address given to the Sydney Lodge No. 404, in 1915

BY

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R. W. M. and Brethren,

I think I can perhaps best begin what I want to tell you by a few personal words about myself; you will see why in a few minutes.

Though I have been a member of the Theosophical Society for thirty-two years, and have had the privilege of close association with our V.·.·. Illus.·.·.V. P. G. M., it is only quite recently that I have had the honour and pleasure to enter the ranks of Co-Masonry. The reason I did not do so before was simply that I am a busy man, and that, as Co-Freemasonry presents itself to the outsider at the Headquarters at Adyar, it seemed just another Theosophical Meeting with exactly the same people present as at the other meetings, except that they sat in a particular order and dressed differently. I had of course no means of knowing in what way the truth was presented, but I knew that it must be the same truth.

I hold very strongly, as I believe do all Masons, that a man should not

join an organisation unless he is prepared to be an active and efficient member of it, and that if he does join he should attend regularly at all Lodge Meetings, unless absolutely compelled to be absent; I held back because I did not see my way to undertake the additional labour of an extra meeting, and I did not see that I should be in any way more useful, if I came in. When I talked these matters over with the Chief officer of Co-Masonry here in Australia, he assured me that I was in error on this last point, and that there was useful work which I could do if I joined the order. I consulted the V.·.·.Illus. ∴∴.Grand Secretary, and he also was of the same opinion, so I naturally expressed my readiness to be of any service in my power. That was how it happened that I came in here, in Sydney—that I have the pleasure and privilege of calling this my Mother Lodge.

I did not know, any more than any other candidate, what to expect when I joined you; but my first sight of a Masonic Lodge was a great and pleasant surprise to me, because I found I was perfectly familiar with all its arrangements, that it recalled exactly similar arrangements which I knew six thousand years ago in ancient

Egypt. I am quite aware that that is a startling statement, yet I assure you that it is literally true. And you will observe that this is not a matter about which any mistake is possible; it is not a case in which coincidence will serve as an explanation. The arrangement of your three chief officers here is a remarkable one—not one which would naturally be the first to occur to men trying to compile a ritual. Your symbols are significant and distinctive, and their combination is peculiar, yet they all belonged to ancient Egypt, and I knew them well there. You may imagine how surprised and how delighted I was to find the old work still going on after so many ages. You have kept almost all the ceremonies unchanged through these thousands of years. There are certain minor points of difference which I notice, but they are really only minor points.

I cannot but think that that alone (even if that were all) should be a fact of extraordinary interest to you. But I must add to it a great deal more; I must explain to you what we had in our minds with regard to all this—that we regarded a meeting of the Lodge as a manifestation of our religious belief in various ways, and we held in connection with it a great

body of knowledge which fits in absolutely with all of your ceremonies, and the way in which you carry out the work. And it seems to me, on looking back, that the knowledge would be of great interest to us as Co-Masons now, and would enable us to understand much more fully what all these workings mean.

This discovery interested me intensely; I spoke of it to our V.·.·. Illus.·.·.Grand Secretary, and we tried to study together something of the history of Masonry. We could see without much difficulty what must be the broad lines of its descent; but we soon found that we needed further information about certain points, so we drew up a few questions on these points and submitted them to Him whom you call the Head of all true Masons throughout the world. You must remember that this great Master, who is to all of you, I suppose, an august and honoured name, is to your V.·.·. Illus.·.·. V. P. G. M., to me and to many others of us a living Man, personally known and most highly revered. I did not know until I had the privilege of entering here, exactly what was His relationship to Co-Freemasonry, as I had never spoken to Him on that subject; but when last I had the honour

of meeting Him in the flesh in Rome walking down the Corso, He took me up to the public gardens on the Pincian Hill, and there we sat and talked for an hour and a half about the Theosophical Society and its work.

So when we found ourselves in difficulties over Masonic history, it was natural that we should at once submit them to Him. He most kindly and graciously answered our questions, and gave us a good deal of information; and He expressed pleasure at seeing us so keenly interested in the work. He confirmed my recollection that the Ritual as you have it here is almost entirely ancient Egyptian, but your historical setting is that of the Jewish Tradition. For example, you mourn the death of a certain Illus.·. Master long ago; we in Ancient Egypt mourned the death and dismerberment of Osiris, the One who became many, and we celebrated a festival at which the dismembered parts came together again, and Osiris rose from the dead. So you will see that some of our wordings were necessarily entirely different, but the forms were absolutely the same.

What the great Master told us as to the history of the movement is briefly this. There were many thousands of people, at the time when

Christianity began to dominate the world, who still clung to the ancient Religions, who preferred to state their view in the older forms. As Christianity grew narrower and more aggressive, and less tolerant of fact, those who knew something of the Truth, and wished to preserve its enshrinement in those older forms, had more and more to keep their meetings secret; therefore they withdrew from public knowledge, and their ceremonies were carried on in private. The same policy of suppression was adopted in many countries simultaneously, and therefore this retirement from public view also took place in many localities; consequently we have not one stream of tradition but several streams, so that in Masonry we are not in the position of the Churches, where there is one orthodox institution and several variants which have fallen away from the original form. With us there are several different lines of tradition which have all equal authenticity and weight. For example, the old Chaldean religion, following out this same idea, arranged its officers in a triangle, and that tradition has been adopted almost all over the continent of Europe. You will find a sketch of that arrangement given in the beginning of your Ritual, so that even there

we have the evidence of two streams of tradition.

Those who have studied Masonic history know that there have been various departures from the earlier forms at different times; sometimes new Rites seem to have been introduced, sometimes new Degrees in old Rites; and in some cases the official status of the people who introduced these changes has been distinctly open to question. You will notice a certain amount of vagueness and somewhat unsavoury tradition surrounding the origin of the Scottish Rite itself; but it would appear that these irregularities have not seriously mattered, for the Powers guiding evolution from behind have taken up whatever was done and used it so far as it could be used; so that though the origin of the Scottish Rite is somewhat obscure, it has been brought into line with the higher degrees of the ancient Egyptian Mysteries, and it now resembles them very fairly. The Masters always encouraged what was good in all these efforts, in order to provide sanctuary for such of the egos born in Europe as could not develop under the cruder teachings which were miscalled Christianity. The philosophy gradually fades out of these, but the Masters take advantage of any favour-

able opportunity to restore a little of it.

I have heard that many people have tried to show that Masonry is derived only from the Operative Guilds of the Middle Ages; though some, going further back, have attached these Guilds to the Roman Collegia. But anyone who is at all acquainted with the ancient Mysteries will see at once that that is incorrect; because you have certain ceremonies which could have no connection with mere Operative Masonry, but have a real relation to the inner teaching of the Mysteries. The s...s you take, the very k...s you use, all of them have a real occult significance which could not be connected with the secrets of the Operative Masons. It is, however, undoubtedly true that Speculative Masonry has been purposely confused with the Operative working. We inquired about that point, and the answer of the Master was that They in the background were responsible for that, and arranged that confusion intentionally, because the Church had grown very suspicious of Secret Societies, suppressing them with great vigour. It did not, however, persecute the Operative Masons, whom it regarded as a body of men wisely guarding the secrets of their trade; the Masters

therefore intentionally confused the Symbolical working with the Operative working, and that effort to preserve the former was consequently successful, and They adopted as much as They could of the Operative Masons' terminology, and entrusted them with some of the secrets: they understand but little of them, but they faithfully carried on the forms without comprehending more than half of what they meant.

The Jews are responsible for much of the existing Masonic terminology. They had learnt the wisdom of Egypt, but characteristically tried to adapt it to their own history, and assigned its origin to their great national hero, King Solomon. They cast it into a form which they could connect with the building of his Temple instead of with the erection of the great Pyramid; and naturally this form could be more readily confused with Operative Masonry than could the philosophic Egyptian setting. That is why their form and their legend were adopted in preference to the Egyptian or Chaldean; that is why we still mourn the death of H. A. instead of the descent of Osiris into matter. That is why certain s.....s are supposed to remind us of certain p.....s, when the truth is that the p.....s were

invented much later to explain the s.....s, which really refer to various centres in the human body.

From this knowledge several points emerge. It is noteworthy that the Masonic ceremonies, which have been so long supposed to be rather in opposition to the received religion of the country, are seen to be themselves religious ceremonies, though they belong to a much older and more philosophical religion. Like every product of those ancient and elaborately perfected systems, these rites are full of meaning—or perhaps I should rather say, of meanings, for in Egypt we attributed to them a fourfold signification. Since every detail is thus full of import, it is obvious that no detail should ever be changed without the greatest care, and only then by those who know its full intent, so that the symbology of the whole may not be spoiled.

Fortunately our ancestors have recognized the importance of handing down the working unchanged, with the result that from my own experience of six thousand years ago I can follow your ritual fairly accurately, even though the language is different. Some few points have been dropped during that vast lapse of time, a few others have been slightly modified;

but they are marvellously few. Your Charges have become much longer, and I notice that the non-officials take much less part in the work than they used to do. In the old days they constantly chanted short versicles of praise or exhortation, and each one of them understood himself to be filling a definite position—to be a necessary wheel in the great machine.

It will be exceedingly difficult to explain to a twentieth century European audience all that this work meant to us in the sunny land of Khem; but I will try to give some slight idea of the four layers of interpretation.

1. It was intended as a reminder to those who did it and who saw it of the way in which the Universe was built by its Great Architect, the different degrees penetrating further and further into the knowledge of His methods and of the principles upon which He works. For we hold not only that He worked in the past, but that He is working now—that His Universe is an active expression of Him. In those days books filled a less prominent place in our lives than they do now, and it was considered that to record knowledge in a series of appropriate and suggestive actions made a more powerful appeal to a

man's mind, and established that knowledge better in his memory than to read it from a book. You are, therefore, preserving by your unvarying action the memory of certain facts and laws in nature.

2. Because that is so, and because the laws of the Universe must be universal in their application, and must act down here as well as above, therefore the fact that such laws exist prescribes a certain course of conduct on our part; and so, as we truly say, Masonry is a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols, but it is a system based not on a mere commandment, "Thus saith the Lord," but on definite facts and laws in nature which cannot be doubted.

3. The work is a preparation for death and for what follows it. The various experiences of the candidate are intended to prepare him for what will happen to him when he passes out of this physical world into the next stage. Indeed I might say there is a vast amount of information about the life after death to be derived from an intelligent consideration of Masonic ceremonies. Above all, it is emphasised that the same laws hold good on the other side of the grave as on this, that in both states we are

equally in the presence of God, and that where that Holy Name can be invoked there is no cause for fear.

4. The fourth intention is the hardest of all to explain. To make you understand that, I must try to take you back, if I can, into the atmosphere of old Egypt, and to the attitude that religious men took there; I do not know if it is possible to reconstruct that in these modern days, which are so hopelessly, so fundamentally different.

The religion which you know best at the present day is intensely individualistic; the great central objective put before most Christians is that of saving their own souls. That duty is represented to be of primary importance. Can you picture to yourselves a religion, just as much a religion in every way, in every respect as earnest, as fervid, as real, from which that idea was entirely absent, to which it would have been utterly inconceivable? Can you think, as a beginning, of a condition of mind in which no one feared anything excepting wrong, and its possible results in delaying unfoldment; in which we looked forward with perfect certainty to our progress after death, because we knew all about it; in which our one desire was not for salvation but for advancement in

evolution, because such advancement brought us greater power to do effectively the Hidden Work which GOD expected of us?

I am not suggesting that everyone in ancient Egypt was altruistic, any more than is everyone in modern England. But I do say that the country was permeated with joy and fearlessness so far as its religious ideas were concerned, and that everyone who by any stretch of courtesy could be described as a religious man was occupied not with thoughts of his personal salvation, but with the desire to be a useful agent of the Divine Power.

The outer religion of ancient Egypt —the official religion in which every one took part, from the King to the slave—was one of the most splendid that has ever been known to man. Gorgeous processions perambulating avenues miles in length, amid pillars so stupendous that they seemed scarcely human work, stately boats in a medley of rainbow colours sweeping majestically down the placid Nile, music triumphant or plaintive, but always thrilling—how shall I describe something so absolutely without parallel in our puny modern times? No doubt the really religious man took his part in all this outward pomp; but what he prized far above all its amaz-

ing magnificence was his membership in some Lodge of the Sacred Mysteries—a Lodge which devoted itself with reverent enthusiasm to the Hidden Work which was the principal activity of this noble religion. It is of this hidden side of the Egyptian cult, not of its outer glories, that Freemasonry is a relic, and the ritual which you have preserved is a part of that of the Mysteries. To explain what this Hidden Work was, let me draw a parallel from a more modern method of producing a somewhat similar result.

Sometime ago I wrote an article on *The Magic of the Christian Church,* in which I mentioned the Christian method of spreading the Divine Power or Grace by means of the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, commonly called the Mass. We must not think of that grace as a sort of poetical expression, or as in the least vague and cloudy; we are dealing with a force as definite as electricity—a spiritual power which is spread abroad over the people in certain ways, which leaves its own effect behind it and needs its own vehicles, just as electricity needs its appropriate machinery. I explained in the article how I had been able by clairvoyance to see the action of that force; how the ser-

vice of the Mass is intended to build up a thought-form, through which that force is distributed by the agency of the Priest—fortunately without taking into account his attitude, his knowledge or even his character; so long as he performs the prescribed ceremonies the result is achieved. If he is also a devout man, the value of the Sacrament is enhanced; but whatever his feelings, the strength is outpoured on the people to a certain extent.

The old Egyptian religion had the same idea of pouring out spiritual force upon all its people, but its method was altogether different. The Christian magic is performed by the Priest alone, and can even be done quite mechanically; the Egyptian plan required the earnest and intelligent co-operation of a considerable number of people. It was therefore much more difficult to achieve perfectly, but when thoroughly done it was far more powerful, and covered a much wider range of country. The Christian scheme needs a vast number of churches dotted all over the land; the Egyptian required only the action of a few Lodges established in the principal cities in order to flood the whole kingdom with the Hidden Light.

The central doctrine of the religion of the ancient Egyptians was that the Divine Power dwelt in every man, even the lowest and most degraded, and they called that Power "The Hidden Light." They held that through that Light, which existed in all, men could always be reached and helped, and that it was their business to find that Light within every one, however unpromising, and to strengthen it. The very motto of the Pharaoh was "Look for the Light," implying that his supreme duty as King was to look for that Hidden Light in every man around him, and strive to bring it forth into fuller manifestation.

The Egyptians held that this Divine Spark which exists in everyone could most effectively be fanned by transmuting and bringing down to the three lower worlds the tremendous spiritual force which is the life of the higher planes, and then pouring it out over the country as has been described. Knowing that spiritual force to be but another manifestation of the manifold power of God, they gave to it also the name of the Hidden Light; and from this double use of the term confusion sometimes arises. They fully recognized that such a downpour of Divine Grace

could be evoked only by a supreme effort of devotion on their part; and the making of such an effort, together with the provision of suitable machinery for spreading the force when it came, was a great part of the Hidden Work to which the noblest of Egyptians devoted so much of their time and energy; and this was the fourth of the objects intended to be served by the sacred and secret Ritual of which ours in Masonry is a relic.

Our lodges in old Egypt were strictly limited as to membership; no Lodge might contain more than forty members, and each of the forty was a necessary part of the Machine, and filled a place that was all his own. Excepting the Officers, whose business was the recitation of the Office and the magnetisation of the Lodge, each member was the representative of a particular quality. One was called Knight of Love, another the Knight of Truth, another the Knight of Perseverance, and so on; and each was supposed to be a specialist in thinking and expressing the quality assigned to him. The idea was that the qualities, thus expressed through the Lodge as a whole, would make the character of a perfect man.

Every member took part in the work, and the labour of those in the

columns was regarded as more arduous than that of the Officers, as it was largely on the mental plane. They had all to join at certain points in the Ritual in sending out streams of thought, the object of the whole effort being to erect over and around the Lodge a magnificent and radiant thought-form of colossal size and perfect proportions, specially constructed to receive and transmit in the most effective way the Divine Force which was called down by their act of devotion. If any member's thought was ineffectual, the mighty cathedral-like thought-form was correspondingly defective in one part; but the R.W.M. was usually a clairvoyant Priest or Priestess who could see where the defect lay, and so could keep his Lodge strictly up to the mark.

You will realise that, as every one present had to bear his part in building that form, the most exact co-operation and the most perfect harmony were absolutely necessary. The slightest flaw in these would have seriously weakened the form through which all the work was being done. It is perhaps a relic of this paramount necessity which dictates our present regulation that any brothers who are not in perfect harmony with each other should not put on their

aprons until they have settled their differences. In ancient Egypt there was an intensity of brotherly feeling between the members of a Lodge which is probably rarely attained now; we felt ourselves bound together by the holiest of ties, not only as parts of the same machine, but actually as fellow-workers with GOD Himself.

Another point of interest is that although Co-Masonry is a comparatively recent development, its chief distinctive feature is of hoary antiquity, for in the work in ancient Egypt women stood exactly upon the same footing as men. The later exclusion of women seems to have been due to the influence of the Operative Guilds.

I do not know how far under conditions so fundamentally different as those which exist at the present day it would be possible to restore to Freemasonry any part of the peculiar position and power which it held on the banks of the Nile; but if there is to be any movement in that direction it can begin only in the ranks of the Co-Masons. That the body has a great future before it in connection with the new sixth sub-race is obvious. In that sub-race, as in all the others, there will be egos of different temperaments; some no doubt who

will seek their inspiration along the lines of the more liberal forms of Christianity, but also certainly some who from disposition and old association will find themselves more attracted to the philosophic Masonic presentation of truth. It is our business to see that this presentation is a fitting one—to make our work so perfect and so reverent that those who see it may find in it what they need, and may never be repelled by anything in the nature of slovenliness or irreverence. We must not forget that Masonry is truly a religion, though so different in form from that which we have been taught to consider the only religion, that its true character is often overlooked.

I am sure that it will be a great encouragement to you to hear that the Head of all true Masons throughout the world takes a keen personal interest in our Order. He has been most gracious and benignant in His ready response to all the enquiries which we have been making. He was kind enough to work His own Lodge for us in English, using our new Ritual, in order to show us exactly how He thought it should be used; and though we can hardly hope to attain to the solemnity and splendour of His working, the opportunity was

a source of great profit and instruction to us. We noticed certain points in the ceremonies in which He followed a tradition which varies slightly from ours; but the salient features were the stateliness and military precision of the workings, and the fact that the members in the columns had much more to do than they have in our plan, as they chanted appropriate versicles at short intervals.

There are various ways in which the recollection of the way in which things were done in ancient Egypt may be of use to us, for those people performed their ceremonies with full knowledge of their meaning, and so the points upon which they laid great stress are likely to be important to us also.

Deep reverence was their strongest characteristic. They regarded their Temple much as the most earnest Christians regard their church, except that their attitude was dictated by scientific knowledge rather than by feeling. They understood that the building was strongly magnetised, and that to preserve the full strength of that magnetism great care was necessary. To speak of ordinary matters in the Temple would have been considered as sacrilege, as it would mean the introduction of a disturbing in-

fluence. Vesting and all preliminary business were always done in an anteroom, and the brethren entered the Lodge in procession, singing. The sanctity of the mosaic pavement was guarded with the most jealous care, and it was never invaded except by the candidate and the officers at proper times, and of course by the Thurifer when he censed the Altar. The exceeding importance of squaring the Lodge accurately is dictated by the same magnetic considerations. The currents of force are rushing along and across that pavement in lines like the warp and woof of a piece of cloth, and also round the edges of it, and anyone who has to cross it, or even come near it, should be careful to move with the force and not against it. Hence the imperative necessity of always keeping to one direction. In modern days less care seems to be taken of the mosaic pavement; I have even seen a case in which the attendance-book, which all have to sign, was placed on a table in the middle of it. With us in Egypt that pavement occupied almost the whole of the floor of the Lodge; now it is often only a small enclosure in the midst of it.

Much of the ancient wisdom has been allowed to slip into oblivion, and

so the true secrets have been lost. But there is every reason to hope that with the aid of the Master they may be recovered, and that we of these later sub-races may prove ourselves just as unselfish and capable of just as good work for our fellow-men as were the people of old. Indeed, we ourselves may well be those men of old, come back in new bodies, but bringing with us old attraction to the form of faith and work which then we knew so well. Let us try to revive under these far different conditions the old unconquerable spirit which distinguished us so long ago; let us recognise that Co-Masonry is a most important branch of the work of our Masters, and let us put all our strength into it. It means a good deal of hard work, for it means that every Officer must do his part quite perfectly; and that, in turn, involves a good deal of training and practice. Yet I feel sure that there are many among us who will respond to the Master's call, and come forward to join us in preparing the way for those who are to come. At present our numbers are but small, but while that is so we have a definite opportunity of doing pioneer work for the movement. Let each Lodge make itself a model Lodge, thoroughly efficient in

its working, so that when anyone visits it he may be impressed by the good work done and by the strength of its magnetic atmosphere, and may thereby be induced to come in and help us with this vast undertaking. Our members must also be able, when they in turn visit other Lodges, to explain our method of working, and show how, from the occult point of view, the ceremonies shuld be performed. Above all, our members must carry with them everywhere the strong magnetism of a completely harmonious centre, the potent radiation of Brotherly Love.

But to radiate this upon others we must first develop it in ourselves. We must determinedly crush down our personalities; we must weed out our dearest and most intimate prejudices; we must sink them unconditionally for the sake of the work; we must offer them up as an oblation at the feet of our Masters. The sacrifice is absolutely necessary; without it there can be no success. A brother Mason has injured you, has neglected you, has spoken ill of you or rudely to you; forget it! What is the importance of your outraged sense of personal dignity in comparison with the momentousness of the work? Of course from your point of view you

were quite right and he was quite wrong; all the more magnanimity do you show in letting bygones be bygones. Consign it all to oblivion; your brain is your own, and you can force it to remember or forget at your will. Commonsense dictates that one should remember only the pleasant incidents of the past, and let the rest sink into the obscurity which they deserve. For the sake of the work you must forego the perverted pleasure of nursing your imagined wrongs; have the courage to take a decisive step and throw it all away boldly and finally, and make a fresh start along more sensible lines. I assure you, you will never regret it; and when it is done, true Masonic work will be possible for you, and you will have your chance of efficient participation in a movement which is under the especial blessing and direction of the Masters of Wisdom, and is part of Their mighty plan for the upliftment of the human race.